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ABSTRACT

Reflective practice in professional education stands in sharp contrast to the assumptions underlying the more commonly used traditional supervisory models. This paper presents findings of a study that examined administrator use of a reflection-on-action process to build a climate of reflection and dialogue. Methodology included a case study of one superintendent and one elementary principal in a small rural school district. Data were gathered through a review of participants' journals; interviews with staff, the superintendent, and the principal; a review of the superintendent's daily log; and audiotapes of superintendent-principal interaction. The findings support the assumption that reflection through structured dialogue and journal writing can be effectively learned as processes and used to improve administrator supervision through changing interactions. The data illustrated the administrators' continual struggles as they confronted the discrepancies between their espoused beliefs and actual behaviors. Two tables are included. (Contains 14 references.) (LMI)

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Reforming Schools Through Changed Supervisory Practices: One Superintendent and One Principal at a Time

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Reforming schools by changing supervisory practices: One superintendent and one principal at a time.

Introduction and Objectives

We learn by doing if we reflect on what we do.
John Dewey

As educational reformers have sought to improve schools through transforming more traditionally directive school leaders into leaders able to function in highly collaborative ways, we have observed the promising emergence of the use of reflection as part of supervisory processes of superintendents and principals. Osterman (1991) has suggested that reflective practice can cause organizational as well as personal and individual change. If reflection on experience provides a basis for revising theories, beliefs, and therefore actions, then a study of the effects of the use of a reflective process on supervisory interactions between the superintendent and principals in a small rural school system may yield information that informs the development of collaborative school leaders.

According to Schon (1983), practitioners often say they believe one thing while their actions indicate an entirely different belief. Reflection on discrepancies between beliefs and actions may add understanding and develop knowledge that improves professional practice. Since principals and teachers will need to learn new ways of working together to create schools that function as collaborative learning environments for all, reflective practice may help realize school reform goals.

Reflective practice in professional education stands in sharp contrast to the assumptions underlying the traditional supervisory models more commonly used (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993). The combined bodies of literature on supervision and reflection support the proposition that as educators become more aware of and better observers of their own behaviors, and that as supervisors seek to encourage reflection, they tend to become more reflective about their own supervisory behavior. Sergiovanni and Starratt (1993), among others, have written about a need for more information on the reflective practice concept and its application to supervisory settings, as well as for the identification of sources describing specific applications of reflective practice to educational administration. Although much is known about the reflective process and its relationship to teacher training (for example, Gilliss, 1988; Jalonga, 1992; Tremmel, 1993; Reagon, 1993; Grimmett, 1988; Russell & Munby, 1991; Schon, 1988), few studies have been conducted to apply the reflective process to administrative supervision or to professional growth for administrators.

The researchers in this study examined administrator use of a process of reflection-on-action. They sought information for response to the following questions: How does the reflective process affect supervisory interactions and interrelationships between the superintendent and the principals? How does reflection impact the superintendent's own professional growth? How is reflection learned? How did the administrators' understanding of reflection change over the course of the research? How was reflection used to effect change in leadership practices? How did principal use of reflective practice affect principal-teacher supervisory interactions? And, finally, what types of dialogue contributed to successful reflective interactions?

Study Methods and Data Sources

The case study approach was used to describe how administrators built a climate of reflection and dialogue which facilitated professional growth and how they implemented a method of reflection-on-action as part of the supervisory process used by the superintendent with principal(s) in her district. As Yin (1989) has argued, case study methodology is ideally suited for an investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, when boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident, and when multiple sources of evidence are used. This study focused on the action content of the everyday lives of the administrators involved.

The primary subjects in the study were the superintendent and the elementary principal in a small rural district. Over the course of the study, however, the high school principal became a secondary subject because of his interactions with the superintendent and with the elementary principal.

The 250 student population attending the two schools housed within the one K-12 facility is overwhelmingly Caucasian. The size and demographics of the district are typical of rural districts in the midwest. Twenty percent of the districts in Missouri are of similar size and demographics. Thirty-five percent of the students qualify for the subsidized lunch program. The board of education is an all-male, predominantly Catholic group who pride themselves on having a progressive district that sets the pace for the surrounding small districts. Parent and community support is strong and active. There is cooperation and frequent interaction with the parochial school located in the same town.

Multiple sources provided the data for this study, which were collected and analyzed over the course of one school year. Reflective journals were maintained by both the superintendent and by the elementary principal. These journals were read on a regular basis by a university professor, who reacted via margin notes which included supportive comments and challenging questions about both the journal content and about the design and quality of the reflections. These margin notes were made to the superintendent, who considered the professor's comments and questions and incorporated them into her thinking, as appropriate. A mid-process evaluation, designed to identify successes and areas for improvement of the research design was conducted: A trained unbiased interviewer conducted interviews with randomly selected staff members to gather information about the behaviors of the principal and superintendent, as well as information about the effects of the administrators' behaviors. This mid-course evaluation added detail and precision to the rich data provided by the reflective journals. The superintendent, combining the roles of practitioner and researcher, served as the primary data collection resource. In addition to the journals, a daily log was developed to add a structure that facilitated later identification of strands or themes. Figure 1 presents a complete listing of data sources utilized in the study.

Figure 1 about here.

Data Analyses and Results

The primary sources of data were the superintendent and principal journals, teacher interviews, principal and superintendent interviews, the daily log and tape recordings of some reflective dialogues between the superintendent and the principal. These data sources were

triangulated, analyzed separately by the researchers, and emergent categories or themes synthesized. Categories were then collapsed to eliminate redundancies. In addition, an exceptionally rich set of interpretations of data was garnered from the superintendent's development of a two-column (Argyris, 1992) analysis of her journal entries related to certain themes. For example, a journal entry was listed on the right side of the column as, "My directions have been vague so as not to influence their direction ..." while the superintendent's actual thinking, was written in the left column as, "I really want them to be at the end (of discussion about this issue) and get them to (just) say O.K. (to what I really wanted them to do)." These data allowed her to more fully examine espoused beliefs and compare them to her beliefs in action.

Three major themes emerged from the superintendent's data: (1) The issue of being a directive supervisor when she really wanted to be a collaborative leader; (2) The difference in the superintendent's treatment and interactions with Principal "H" and Principal "E" and whether or not this was a gender issue; and (3) The issue of when to utilize formative growth thinking or to move on to summative judgments. Three themes also emerged from the principal's data: (1) The issue of discipline vs. punishment; (2) The issue of parent involvement; and (3) The issue of the leadership role of the principal. In addition, two themes were shared by both the superintendent and the principal: the issue of the supervisor as "fixer" and the issue of professional growth. (Figure 2 presents a complete listing of the themes that emerged from analyses of the data.) Throughout the study, the data illustrated the continual struggles both administrators were having as they were confronted with the discrepancies between their espoused beliefs and their actual actions.

Figure 2 about here.

The data sources in this study provided rich descriptions of how the use of the reflective process affected the supervisory interactions and interrelationships between the superintendent and the principal. In a year end conversation with the superintendent, the principal talked about the power of the reflective process, as used in both the journal and the dialogues, to change her thinking about her behaviors. She said that previously she had not given much thought to the role of the principal as anything other than a manager of tasks and organizer of the school. However, her stories over the course of the year indicated that she began to do much more than complete tasks and organize routines. For example, the principal initially viewed her role as instructional supervisor as being only concerned with evaluation of the teaching process, until reflective dialogue with the superintendent caused her to begin talking with teachers about their beliefs about student discipline and how they thought discipline should be handled. The principal's journal entries described the effects of the superintendent's question, "What do you really believe about how we should treat children at school?" on her thinking. She recorded an incident that occurred one day with a student, whom she overheard talking back with a substitute and refusing to do what was asked of her. The principal immediately pulled the student out of the classroom and "got in her face". "I reprimanded her by raising my voice and I even remember shaking my finger at her!" she wrote as she reflected on the event later. She went on to describe her feelings, "I am saying that I want to discipline with love and understanding, helping the students learn from their mistakes, and instead this anger welled up inside of me and I engaged in a power struggle with this girl. Actually, I feel the entire class was in a power struggle with adults and I got in the middle of

it." In later conversations with the superintendent, the principal discussed her surprise at how powerful was the realization that her beliefs were not in line with her actions. She did not feel that she would have recognized the discrepancy had she not been engaged in reflection about her beliefs about discipline by the superintendent's initial question. Subsequently, the principal wrote about her discussions with teachers about their underlying beliefs about specific disciplinary actions. These discussions were then expanded to include teacher belief systems about the general focus of interactions with parents and about parental involvement in classroom projects.

The principal's interviews and journal entries showed the growing depth of a trusting relationship established with the superintendent as a result of the reflective process. In her end-of-year interview with the university professor, she talked about what a different experience it had been to have the reflective dialogues with her superintendent. She indicated that the relationship with her former superintendent (also female) while positive, had been very different because most of the conversations had been about tasks to be accomplished; none of them had involved discussions of philosophy or beliefs about basic values, nor had they connected these beliefs and values to actions at school.

The process of reflective practice supported changes in the superintendent's professional growth. Her stories spoke to the impact of reflection upon her behaviors and her subsequent growth in the areas of interpersonal communications and professional relationships. Beginning journal entries described staff members lining up at the superintendent's office door with problems that they wanted solved, and the intense internal struggle that she had with the speed and efficiency of solving the problems, instead of engaging those most affected by the outcome in helping with the solution, as was her stated belief. She wrote, "I am feeling pressure to cast aside my espoused beliefs and act paternalistically, because I think that is what this culture expects." To illustrate she described an interaction with a veteran janitor whose comment was, "You trust my judgment. You shouldn't do that. You should just tell me what to do, because you're the boss." Her concern that involving others might be interpreted as a sign of weakness or inability to make a decision led to her questioning whether or not it was a "gender issue". She asked, "Are females in this local system seen as inherently weak?"

Throughout the study, the superintendent wrote about her professional relationships with the two principals and how reflection affected her struggle with the issue of directive versus collaborative leadership. While she viewed direction and collaboration as opposite ends of a continuum, she held a strong belief that her own leadership was more effective when she operated in a collaborative fashion. Data sources revealed that the superintendent described herself as being more directive with principal "H" than with principal "E". In considering the reasons for this, she wrote, "When I ask Principal H what he thinks should be done about a given situation, he sometimes says he's not sure or offers a solution that is clearly not workable (in my estimation). When I ask Principal E what she thinks, she always has an answer and frequently is merely seeking reassurance that it is the correct course of action." In a journal entry about goal-setting, she wrote, "I was thinking I wanted to help set specific goals for Principal H, but that Principal E could set her own goals. I seem to spend my time with Principal H fixing his mistakes, while my time with Principal E is spent reaffirming her actions." The superintendent expressed concern about this issue with the university professor and wondered if her fears about Principal H's weaknesses affected her ability to work in a collaborative manner with him.

The superintendent also struggled with the issue of when to be directive or collaborative alternately with the same individual. Journal entries describe working with Principal E and trying

to find the right mix between responding to requests for a definitive solution and engaging the principal in helping to create the solution. For example, "I am giving Principal E more direction when she asks, because I am seeing that she is not ready nor comfortable with much latitude when it comes to something that will be so critical to the future direction of the district. . .I think she has been very frustrated with my being directive and then vague and then directive, as I try to adjust to her needs."

Within the study, the findings supported the assumption that reflective practice can be effectively learned as a process or procedure. Margin notes from the university professor resulted in refining the process with more details and more emphasis on probing for deeper understanding. The data supported the premise that the understanding of reflective practice changed as the power of the process revealed itself in the results experienced by both of the administrators. This study also supported the research question about the use of reflective practice as a strategy to effect change in leader practices. Stories described detail the changes that both administrators made in their interactions with others as a result of the reflective process. Lastly, the stories in this study supported the premise that certain types of dialogue, such as paraphrasing, probing, and reframing, contributed to successful reflective conversations.

Implications

The findings in this study appear to support the assumption that reflection through structured dialogue and journaling can be effectively learned as processes and used to improve administrator supervision through changing the interactions and interrelationships between the administrators involved; and, further, that use of a reflective process provides a powerful ongoing professional growth experience for those who engage in it. This study also appears to support the research question about reflective practice as a strategy to effect change in leader practices, and it adds to the beginning accumulation of knowledge about the use of reflective practice in administrator supervision and professional growth.

This study suggested a number of areas for potentially valuable future research. Further research could be done by establishing a reflective dialogue setting among teachers to examine the effects of collegial dialogue on teacher's professional growth and development. Such a study could provide increased understanding about the types and conditions of teacher/teacher interactions that result in improved professional performances. Another dimension of reflective practice could be investigated by a research design that considers what conditions must exist in order for reflective practice to effect changes in professional practice, and under what conditions does reflection seem to be less successful. The whole area of defensiveness in adult learning invites much work. The behaviors that adults use to prevent learning could be elucidated and studied. Other studies of reflective practice might involve a look at the consistency with which educators are inconsistent in their beliefs and actions, in their daily interactions within the schools within which they work. Finally, an especially intriguing realm of study is the idea that administrators may be able to use knowledge gained in reflective practice to formulate criteria for use in making better judgments about when they should continue to encourage individual growth and development of the professionals they supervise, as opposed to encouraging those professionals to find another direction in a different field.

Conclusion

From the perspective of the researchers involved in this study, several implications for education seem readily apparent. To create a learning organization, a district must enable its professionals to inspect their actions in relation to their beliefs. Teaching all professionals on a

staff to engage in reflective dialogue in a way that results in higher quality decisions about professional practice can cause a community of learners to be created. To create a community of learners, a school district must encourage its professionals to examine their professional practices. Multiple reflectors are needed to understand the complex roles that educators play in their schools and to create dialogues about their work with themselves and with others. Such reflective interaction is a key dynamic in the creation of a learning community. Encouraging this reflective dialogue would send a signal that the school district valued the process of linking thought and action. It would also send the clear message that collaboration through reflection involves everyone in the learning community. As members of the learning community becomes actively involved in the give and take of learning, formal leaders, such as the superintendent and principals, become players in the exchange of energy for continued learning, rather than the sole dispensers of that energy.

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Figure 1: Data sources for the study.

Superintendent's journal.
Principal's journal.
University professor's journal reviews and margin notes.
Mid-process interview by unbiased trained interviewer with randomly selected faculty members.
Superintendent's daily log of "trigger events".
Mid-process analysis of journal details and precision.
Audio tapes of reflective dialogues between superintendent and principal.
Audio tapes of professor's end-of-study interviews with principal and superintendent.
Comparison of superintendent's and professor's syntheses of themes from journals.
Superintendent's two-column analysis of journal entries.

Figure 2: Themes emerging from the study.

Superintendent:
- Direction versus collaboration.
- Differences in professional relationships between superintendent and principals.
- Formative growth and summative judgments.

Principal:
- Discipline or punishment.
- Parent involvement.
- Principal's role as an instructional leader.

Shared themes of the superintendent and principal:
- Supervisor as "fixer of problems".
- Personal and professional growth experiences.